

# Opposing tensions of local and international standards for EAP writing programmes: Who are we assessing for?



Emma Bruce <sup>a,\*</sup>, Liz Hamp-Lyons <sup>b</sup>

<sup>a</sup> City University of Hong Kong, Hong Kong

<sup>b</sup> University of Bedfordshire, UK

## ARTICLE INFO

### Article history:

Available online 24 April 2015

### Keywords:

EAP  
Writing assessment  
Alignment to standards  
Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR)  
IELTS  
Local needs

## ABSTRACT

In response to recent curriculum changes in secondary schools in Hong Kong including the implementation of the 3–3–4 education structure, with one year less at high school and one year more at university and the introduction of a new school leavers' exam, the Hong Kong Diploma of Secondary Education (HKDSE), universities in the territory have revisited their English language curriculums. At City University a new EAP curriculum and assessment framework was developed to fit the re-defined needs of the new cohort of students. In this paper we describe the development and benchmarking process of a scoring instrument for EAP writing assessment at City University. We discuss the opposing tensions of local (HKDSE) and international (CEFR and IELTS) standards, the problems of aligning EAP needs-based domain scales and standards with the CEFR and the issues associated with attempting to fulfil the institutional expectation that the EAP programme would raise students' scores by a whole CEFR scale step. Finally, we consider the political tensions created by the use of external, even international, reference points for specific levels of writing performance from all our students and suggest the benefits of a specific, locally-designed, fit-for-purpose tool over one aligned with universal standards.

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## 1. Introduction

This study was undertaken at City University, one of the six publicly-funded universities in Hong Kong, a region of China where English is a second or third language but is the medium of tertiary education. The vast majority of City University students come from Chinese Medium of Instruction (CMI) secondary schools, and have low levels of spoken and/or written English. Recent changes in the Hong Kong education structure have meant that from the 2012–13 academic year, students come to university a year earlier than in the past, receiving one year more in tertiary education and one year less in secondary. The Hong Kong Examinations and Assessment Authority (HKEAA) introduced a new school leaving exam, the Hong Kong Diploma of Secondary Education (HKDSE), which is now largely used to decide which students will be offered university places. The 2012 English language component of this exam was benchmarked against the IELTS, resulting in an HKDSE level 3 becoming the minimum passing score. Through an indirect process of alignment, this HKDSE level was predicted to equate with an IELTS score range of 5.48–5.68, which itself is indirectly aligned by Cambridge Assessment with a CEFR level around a

\* Corresponding author. ELC, 2nd Floor, Academic 1, City University, Tat Chee Avenue, Kowloon Tong, Hong Kong. Tel.: +852 96789029.

E-mail addresses: [emmie.lou@cityu.edu.hk](mailto:emmie.lou@cityu.edu.hk) (E. Bruce), [Liz.Hamp-Lyons@beds.ac.uk](mailto:Liz.Hamp-Lyons@beds.ac.uk) (L. Hamp-Lyons).

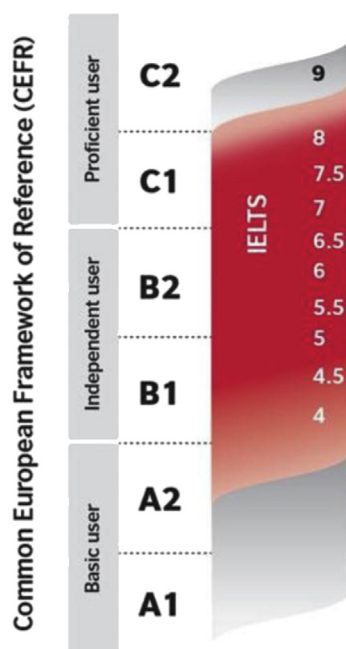


Fig. 1. CEFR–IELTS concordance.

low B2. See Fig. 1,<sup>1</sup> an extract from the IELTS website detailing this alignment. This is also the minimum English language entry standard for City University.

In response to these changes, most Hong Kong universities have revisited their English Language curricula and their initial EAP courses. City University set its goal for students' exit English language level at IELTS 6.5 (CEFR B2+), meaning that the EAP programme should bring students as a whole group from a notional IELTS 5.5 on entry to IELTS 6.5 on exit or from a low CEFR B2 to CEFR B2(+) or low C1. To those not familiar with the CEFR scale, this may sound like a rather small step, but in fact as Fig. 1 shows, the CEFR B2 performance descriptors are seen as covering a range from very high B2+ (between IELTS 6.5 and 7.0) to a mid-B1 (IELTS 5.0 falls exactly on the line between CEFR B1 and B2). This range in fact covers almost the entire Hong Kong high school graduating population likely to apply to universities.

In this paper we describe the process of developing a writing assessment to fit the re-defined needs of the students, and we discuss the problems associated with attempting at the same time to fulfil the institutional expectation that the 144-hour EAP programme would raise students' scores by almost a whole CEFR scale step. We demonstrate the problems of aligning EAP needs-based domain scales and standards with the Common European Framework of Reference. Finally, we consider the political tensions created by the use of external, even international, reference points for specific levels of writing performance for all our students.

## 2. Getting ready for change

In preparation for the new cohort of HKDSE students, who were due to arrive at the start of the 2012–13 academic year, City University began a lengthy process of curriculum renewal in 2008 with the intention of a full year-long pilot with the 2011 entering cohort (see Fig. 2 for a timeline of this process). There was much speculation and anticipation among tertiary educators surrounding the issue of exactly what this new breed of students, who had been through a completely revamped secondary school curriculum, would be like. Although curriculum documents and sample HKDSE exam and assessment papers had been made available by the Education Bureau and Exams Authority, there was still a sense that we were navigating into unknown territory. At this time local English Language Centres established a conference, which has since become an annual event, to share curriculum and assessment blueprints, discuss the impact of the new 3–3–4 structure and the likely changes in the student population in terms of English language proficiency. One of the plenary presentations at this inaugural conference was given by a member of the HKEAA, who attempted to shed light on the make-up of the new student body. Staff from the HKEAA also visited local universities in an attempt to explain the new exam structure and demystify this new breed of students. Nevertheless, by the time the new Diploma of Secondary Education was introduced with the September 2012

<sup>1</sup> Downloaded 1-4-2013 from: [http://www.ielts.org/researchers/common\\_european\\_framework.aspx](http://www.ielts.org/researchers/common_european_framework.aspx).

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